
CUBA

Young Fossil Detection—New Error Correction

Hortensia Louro
University of Havana

Unfortunately the chances of any animal becoming a fossil are not very great, and the chances of a fossil then being discovered many thousands of years later are even less. (Doff 1988:57)

Whatever the case may be in nature, the chances of linguistic items becoming fossils are very great, and the chances of fossils being discovered are even greater. After teaching English for several years, teachers become able to detect errors easily in their students' pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, spelling, use and appropriacy, and their ability to get the intended message across.

If one has been trained audiolingually as an error chaser and has spent years making bloody marks with red ink, underlining, circling, highlighting mistakes in written work, correcting every error in students' oral expression, it is not easy to change one's attitude from being corrective or even punitive to being encouraging.

The above does not mean that teachers, now in the bushes of communicative language teaching, have become anti-correction proponents with the ease with which a lizard changes color, and neglect the existence of young and old fossils in false beginners. Still, those of us, error chasers of the past, though convinced that those techniques were not as useful as we thought, often wonder why our students fail to produce something as basic as the -s in third-person singular verb forms.

Why errors occur and how they should be dealt with in the classroom have been puzzling teachers for ages. We have put the blame on the mother tongue, the foreign language, the teacher, his/her training, the materials, the learners and their ears.

Selinker (1972) identifies five processes central to second-language learning and acquisition, each of which can force fossilizable items, rules, and subsystems to appear and probably remain in the interlanguage. These are: *language transfer*, or interference from the mother tongue; *transfer of training*, or errors due to the nature of the language-learning

materials and approaches; *strategies of second-language learning*, or errors due to the learner's own approach to the material to be learned; *strategies of second-language communication*, or errors due to the way in which the learner attempts to communicate with native speakers in natural language; and *overgeneralization of target-language rules*, or errors due to the way in which the learner restructures and reorganizes linguistic material.

Whatever the process responsible, once an error is fossilized in a learner's performance, I treat it by a technique that has given me good results so far. After the first week of classes I give each student a card we call "My Fossils." With examples, I explain or demonstrate (or have students do it) what inaccuracies are likely to occur (according to my observations). We shift from the term *error* or *mistake* to the term *fossil*.

Fossils often include pronunciation problems typical of Spanish speakers learning English (*sp*, *st*, *sk*, *sl* clusters, and *w* ["goel" for *well*]); the -s in third-person present singular; *I want that you* (Quiero que . . .) for *I want you to*; *library* for *librería* (bookstore); title spelled with double *t* (maybe due to *little*); and appropriacy errors.

During the third week of class we analyze how many members of the group have fossilized the same errors and the class forms "neighborhoods of concern." With peer correction, the ones that make the same mistakes develop an awareness and concentrate on improving. During the semester, they cross out the fossils they have eradicated. By the end of the course all the fossils on the cards should have been crossed out. This self-control technique helps adult learners particularly in identifying their strengths and weaknesses. It enables the teacher to act as a "facilitator" in developing a new attitude towards correction.


Some kind of enjoyment is experienced by learners when they identify their own mistakes. This awareness contributes to success.

The following approaches have given me good if not magical results:

- deal with errors as natural consequences in the struggle to learn
- develop in learners a positive attitude towards peer correction and teacher correction
- give students self-confidence in their own resources
- give them "powerful" feedback
- trace back or explain why errors occur using scientifically sound but simple, comprehensible explanations
- provide individual help with tasks requiring the use of the problem item
- joke without sarcasm about why errors occur, establishing a friendly, loving, competitive, and cooperative classroom atmosphere

To succeed in the eradication of errors, learners should first detect, then eliminate their fossils, while enjoying the process.

REFERENCES

- Doff, Adrian. 1988. *Teach English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Selinker, L. 1972. Interlanguage. *IRAL*, 10, 3, pp. 201–31. 

Hortensia Louro is an assistant professor of English at the School of Foreign Languages, University of Havana. She has done research on listening comprehension, video, communicative testing, and curriculum design.
